

How old is young and how young is old? The restructuring of age and the life-course in Europe

Wallace, Claire

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Institut für Höhere Studien (IHS), Wien
Institute for Advanced Studies, Vienna

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No. 11

How Old is Young and How Young is Old?
The Restructuring of Age and the Life-course in
Europe

Claire Wallace

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Institut für Höhere Studien
Stumpergasse 56, A-1060 Wien
Fax: +43/1/597 06 35

Claire Wallace
Phone: +43/1/599 91-213
e-mail: wallace@ihssv.wsr.ac.at

Institut für Höhere Studien (IHS), Wien
Institute for Advanced Studies, Vienna

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Abstract

The argument of the paper is that modernisation tendencies helped to construct the category of "youth" which contemporary tendencies are once more de-structuring. Modern institutions such as education, work, the city, leisure industries served to structure age-status transitions so that the life course was divided according to distinct stages. The extension of social policies and state institutions defined youth in particular ways as targets for intervention. However, there were also variations between social classes, between gender, between ethnic groups and between countries. The former Communist countries of Eastern Europe defined age even more strongly than the welfare capitalist countries of Western Europe. However, recent tendencies have been towards the de-structuring of age-status transitions as leisure, family transitions and education are no longer associated so strongly with age - or at any rate not only with the young. Age starts to become a more elastic category as both young people and adults often resist age-typing. This has important implications for social policies and for citizenship in contemporary European societies.

Zusammenfassung

In diesem Artikel wird argumentiert, daß Modernisierungstendenzen geholfen haben, die Kategorie "Jugend" zu konstruieren, die durch gegenwärtige Tendenzen wiederum de-strukturiert werden. Moderne Institutionen wie (Aus)Bildung, Arbeit, die Stadt, Freizeitindustrien, haben dazu beigetragen, Lebensabschnitte als Übergangsphasen zu konstruieren, so daß der Lebensverlauf in bestimmte Abschnitte unterteilt war. Die Ausweitung von Sozialpolitik und staatlichen Institutionen haben Jugend in spezifischer Weise als Ziel ihrer Interventionen definiert. Unterschiede bestanden aber zwischen den sozialen Schichten, den Geschlechtern, ethnischen Gruppen und zwischen Ländern. Die früher kommunistischen Staaten Osteuropas haben Alter noch viel stärker strukturiert als die Wohlfahrtsstaaten Westeuropas. Aber neue Trends weisen in Richtung De-konstruktion von einzelnen Lebensabschnitten, da Freizeit, Familie und Bildung nicht mehr so eng mit dem Alter verbunden sind - oder auf jeden Fall nicht mehr länger mit Jugend. "Alter" wird zu einem stärker dehnbaren Begriff, da sowohl Jugendliche als auch Erwachsene nicht mehr so einfach einer Alterstypisierung folgen. Das hat wichtige Konsequenzen für die Sozialpolitik und für die Bevölkerung in gegenwärtigen europäischen Gesellschaften.

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Introduction

As we grow older our bodies change. Yet, we cannot assume from this the way in which age is treated in society. There is no automatic and inevitable way of responding socially to the changes which accompany aging. This is no less true of the young than of the old. The body itself is a social and cultural construct (Featherstone and Hepworth 1991). What it means to be 'old' or 'young' can be very variable, but it varies in some systematic ways. In this paper I will consider ways in which aging is socially structured by looking at the earlier stages of the life-course, particularly at that of 'youth'.

When 'youth' or the 'elderly' are referred to in either academic writing or in popular journalism, it is usually assumed that we know what this means. These are taken for-granted categories. However, youth can be highly variable. In some contexts it is used to refer to teenagers, in other contexts to those under the age of 30 or even 40! For example, Youth Training is mainly intended for those up to 18 and yet membership of the youth hostelling association is extended to people up to the age of 30. It is in fact very unclear when youth ends and when adulthood or middle age, or old age for that matter, begins. New age-status' such as twenty-something or post-adolescence are added but this often serves to confuse rather than clarify a complex situation. Texts written to analyze the problems of adolescence or youth are attempts to define a rather uncertain and indefinable social category. Yet it is a social category which plays an important role in allocating resources and giving or restricting access to various social goods. In this paper I consider 'youth' in historical and comparative terms in order to understand how and why this category is changing. It is my argument that 'youth' as a numerically defined age category with particular properties and characteristics is a product of modernization. This modernization took place in different ways in different places, but by destroying traditional authority, it helped to define 'youth' in terms of calibrated time associated with particular psycho-social characteristics rather than in terms of marital or property status. This rationalistic method of measuring youth has however, never been firmly embedded and is further de-stabilized by late or post-modern tendencies to undermine clear-cut age-status transitions. The first part of this paper therefore looks at the emergence of youth in the context of modernity, the second part considers the de-construction of youth by the same processes later in the twentieth century and in the final section I consider some of the implications of these latter developments.

In order to better understand this process, I will introduce the concept of age-status transitions. By this I mean the way in which age groups also become status groups because particularly social characteristics are assigned to them. People therefore hold different kinds of status in society according to their age. Yet age-status groups are different to other forms of social structuration because generally people move from one age-status group to another rather than being fixed in any particular group. The transition from one group to another is assumed to have some biologically-ascribed inevitability since the kinds of 'rites de passage' which existed in more traditional societies are for the most part lacking in complex industrial societies. However, age-

status groups are also social groups because they derive their meaning from social hierarchies rather than biological causes. Nor are these age-status groups universal and inevitable. They vary across societies and within different societies at different points in time. They also vary between social groups. It is by comparing these phenomena that we can better understand how 'age' becomes a social construct. Therefore the concept of age-status transitions can help us to see aging as a social phenomenon and thus distance ourselves from the biological processes which accompany it.

In order to understand how age-status transitions are constructed, I will consider the ways in which modernization helped to construct one particularly age-status: adolescence and youth. Although 'youth' as a social group or an idea, existed throughout recorded history, it was seldom associated with any very precise age. Furthermore, it was implicitly usually about young men. 'Youth' as a category precisely calibrated by age and associated with particular kinds of personality and social characteristics was a product of modernity. By contrast, 'adolescence' was a more scientifically precise stage of personal development which was invented, as Musgrove (1964) tells us, at the same time as the internal combustion engine. Here, I shall consider some of the factors by which modernization gave youth a very particular meaning. In particular, I shall look at trends in urbanization and industrialization, in the development of mass education systems, in changing notions of time and with leisure.

Firstly modernization was associated with urbanization and industrialization. In some countries this occurred earlier than in others and in some countries it involved more state intervention, in others less so. Therefore I shall refrain from referring to any particular period or model of industrialization as being definitive. Industrialization created a separation between the home and the workplace so that the home gradually came to be seen as a separate, more private environment (Davidoff et al. 1976). In this environment women and children lead secluded lives, sheltered from the cut and thrust of the market place. This helped to create a particular model of childhood as something innocent or separate from the world and this was later applied to youth and adolescence too. Urbanization did however, create new spaces for young people. The early migration to the city was primarily by young people so that cities became places where young people were concentrated, particularly in the early phases of industrialization. In countries where industrialization took place very rapidly through communist intervention this can be seen in quite dramatic figures. For example, whereas 80% of young people lived in villages in 1945, by 1980 this had dropped to 13.8% (Mitev 1985). In Germany during the nineteenth century too, young people left their rural families and congregated in cities, so that 100,000 hostel beds were provided for them through churches and charitable organizations in 1900 in Berlin and 22,897 in Leipzig (Linton 1991). Industrialization also provided young people with independent incomes, some of which they could spend on their own consumption preferences and these also made it possible for young people to set up home independently rather than waiting for an inheritance or for the death of a parent. They were able to form alliances based upon 'free' romantic love rather than arrangements made by parents and this disrupted the traditional bonds of community which

existed in many countries as well as destroying parental authority. Youth was therefore very much an urban phenomenon.

The congregation of young people in cities uncontrolled by parents or community relations worried many social reformers in western and northern Europe. Reform movements developed from the late nineteenth century and early twentieth centuries in many industrial societies aimed at providing hostels, supplementary education and organized activities for young people. These 'youth savers' (and the corresponding 'child savers') became what Kett (1977) calls the 'architects of adolescence'. They helped to shape an awareness of youth as a period of life when people can go dangerously astray if they are not properly socialized and monitored. Through their writings and conferences they were able to shape a particular model of 'youth' as an age-status transition and an essential and fragile stage in personal development (Linton 1991). In particular, Cote (1995) identifies the focus upon youth as being associated with "storm and stress", a turbulent and problematical stage of life as being particularly important in providing an opportunity for intervention and professional guidance. These reformers, coming from middle class backgrounds where youth were sequestered from the world through more extended education, were particularly shocked at the early maturity or 'precocity' of working youth (Gillis 1981). The financial and physical freedom afforded by industrialization and urbanization to this age group was felt to lead potentially to promiscuity and degeneration. Youth saving movements were often linked to the development of national consciousness because it was felt that the new seedcorn of tomorrow was being wasted and was becoming morally and physically unfit.

Youth savers argued for the care, protection and control of young people because they were felt to be distinct from adults. This was particularly evident in the criminal justice system where reformers had been campaigning since the mid-nineteenth century for the harsh punishments which applied to adults were inappropriate for children because they should be reformed or saved instead of punished. Therefore an age was found before which young people were not felt to be responsible for their actions. A similar debate about the age of consent ensued, helping to define at what age a young person is thought to be able to make decisions concerning their own sexuality. The fact these normative social definitions do not coincide with the physical development of young bodies leads to much tension and anxiety. Although young men and women become physically mature much earlier, they are thought to be "too young" to engage in sex until they are sixteen. But if young people were different from the rest of adult society at what age exactly could they become full citizens? When could they exercise moral judgment? In the USA this was associated with religious conversion and the age at which a young person could commit themselves to God. The youth reformers helped to develop voluntary organizations to deal with different aspects of young people's lives and many of these later become part of the state welfare system, particularly as reforms appeared in the form of legislation to protect young people and children from dangerous jobs, to regulate what they were or were not allowed to do and so on.

Therefore the classification of youth as an age-status transition was tied very much to the development of the state system and particularly welfare provision. Age became an mechanism of allocation, a way of classifying citizens. The extension of the franchise and the creation of the 'individual' which was a feature of modern European capitalist society implied a moral and social development with an age at which a person could be deemed eligible to enter contracts, vote or make decisions. Since there was no very precise way of measuring this, there was and still is fierce debate about at which age people can be punished, at which age they should be allowed to have sex, what sort of sex they can have, at what age they should be allowed to vote or to get married and so on (Jones and Wallace 1992). Different models prevail in different arms of the welfare system so there is no natural consensus from which age-status transitions are forged.

The identification of youth or adolescence with particular problems provided a base for the development of professional knowledge so that 'experts' in the form of sociologists, psychologists, medical specialists and so on were able to elaborate theories to justify the differential treatment and the normative development of young people. Such texts and discourses tended to emphasize the fragile and problematical nature of adolescence and youth - the fact that if something went wrong at this stage then the whole adult would be lost. This professional power-base in turn legitimized further intervention in 'youth' and identified youth as a target group for intervention.

The modern state system was therefore very significant in the surveillance, rationalization and control of its citizens by using age-status transitions. In Foucault's terminology (1) this is a technology of power. The date of birth becomes the essential question necessary on nearly every form or piece of documentation - it is the way of classifying individuals.

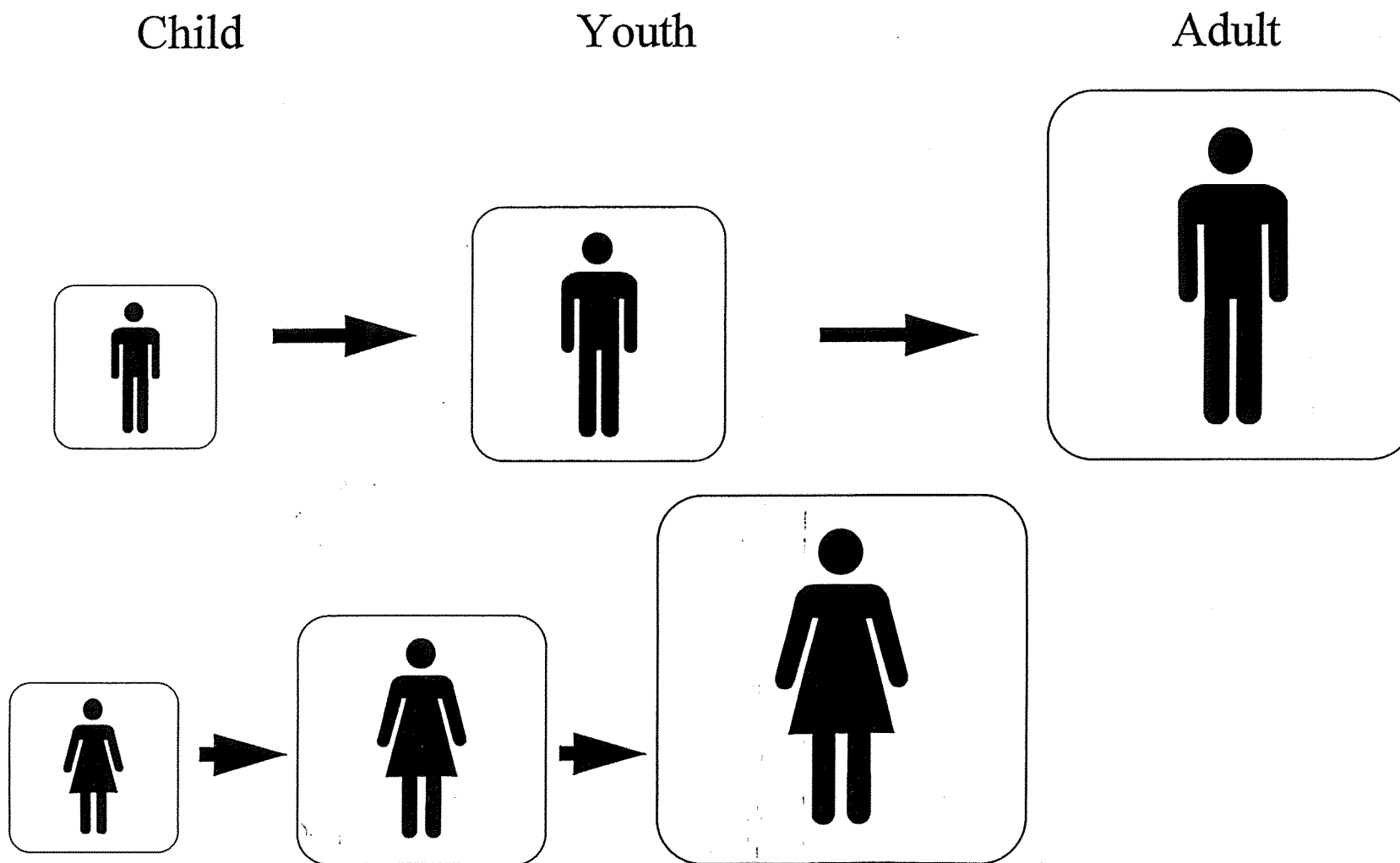
Most important in this respect was the construction of mass education systems, mostly from the late nineteenth century onwards. Mass education meant that everyone was age-status graded by the obligation to attend full-time education for a certain period of their lives. This period has changed - and generally been extended through the twentieth century - but was one of the single most important ways of constructing 'youth'. Within school too, age-status transitions were further institutionalized by sorting pupils according to age in year-groups. Prior to this schools had contained classes with pupils of all age groups (Kett 1977). Each age-status group was associated with a particular stage of educational progress. However, within mass education there were important differences in the treatment of children from different social groups and from different genders. Age meant something different among these social groups. Therefore, whilst middle class girls, for example were thought to have to be sheltered from any undue exertion, which could include any mentally taxing school work, young working class girls were thought to need to lots of exercise to mop up their surplus energy (Gorham 1982, Dyhouse 1981). Similarly young men were thought to benefit from mental and physical excise in a way that young women were not.

Linked to this was the development of a particular notion of time. Through modernization time was something to be ever more segmented, rationalized and controlled. Linear models of time measured the working day, the school day (punctuated by bells, timetables and clocks) and the life-course. Linear models of time also applied to history and both individuals and societies were seen as making progress along this linear continuum (Bauman 1993). A parallel was drawn by one of the most famous experts of adolescence, G. Stanley Hall in 1904, between the progress of society and the progress of the individual. According to Hall, the child was like the barbarian society - untamed and savage. It then went through various civilizing processes, including compulsory education, to become a kind of semi-savage entity - an adolescent. Eventually, if all went well and with proper supervision and control, this semi-savage would become a fully civilized human being. Women, however, were not thought to mature in quite the same way. They never quite became as fully mature as men and this arrested development was used as a way of justifying their exclusion from public life and from the ability to make their own decisions or to own property. They were classified as being more like children. This model of linear development can be illustrated in figure 1.

The elaboration of age-status transitions meant that youth was associated with various problems - such as masturbation or promiscuity - which were not thought to be quite so acute in later stages of life. The control of the sexuality of adolescence and youth helped in the further elaboration of this as an age-status transition (Griffin 1995).

Modernization also brought with it the construction of 'leisure time' as distinct periods outside of work. The main anxiety of reformers was that removed from their families, young people had too much leisure time and in any case families could not be entirely trusted with the job of socializing and civilizing adolescents. Therefore youth organizations organized activities for young people in their leisure time so that even this too could be supervised and controlled (Springhall 1977). Young people also however, helped to define their own sub-cultures in their leisure time since youth organizations were not universally popular. Leisure life-styles came to be particularly associated with what Hoggart (1958) calls the 'brief flowering' of working class adolescence before they were ground down by hard work, poverty and childbearing. Adolescence and youth was seen as one of the most 'happy' and 'carefree' stages of life. It was associated with hedonism, romance, beauty, courtship and lack of responsibility.

Age-Status Transitions

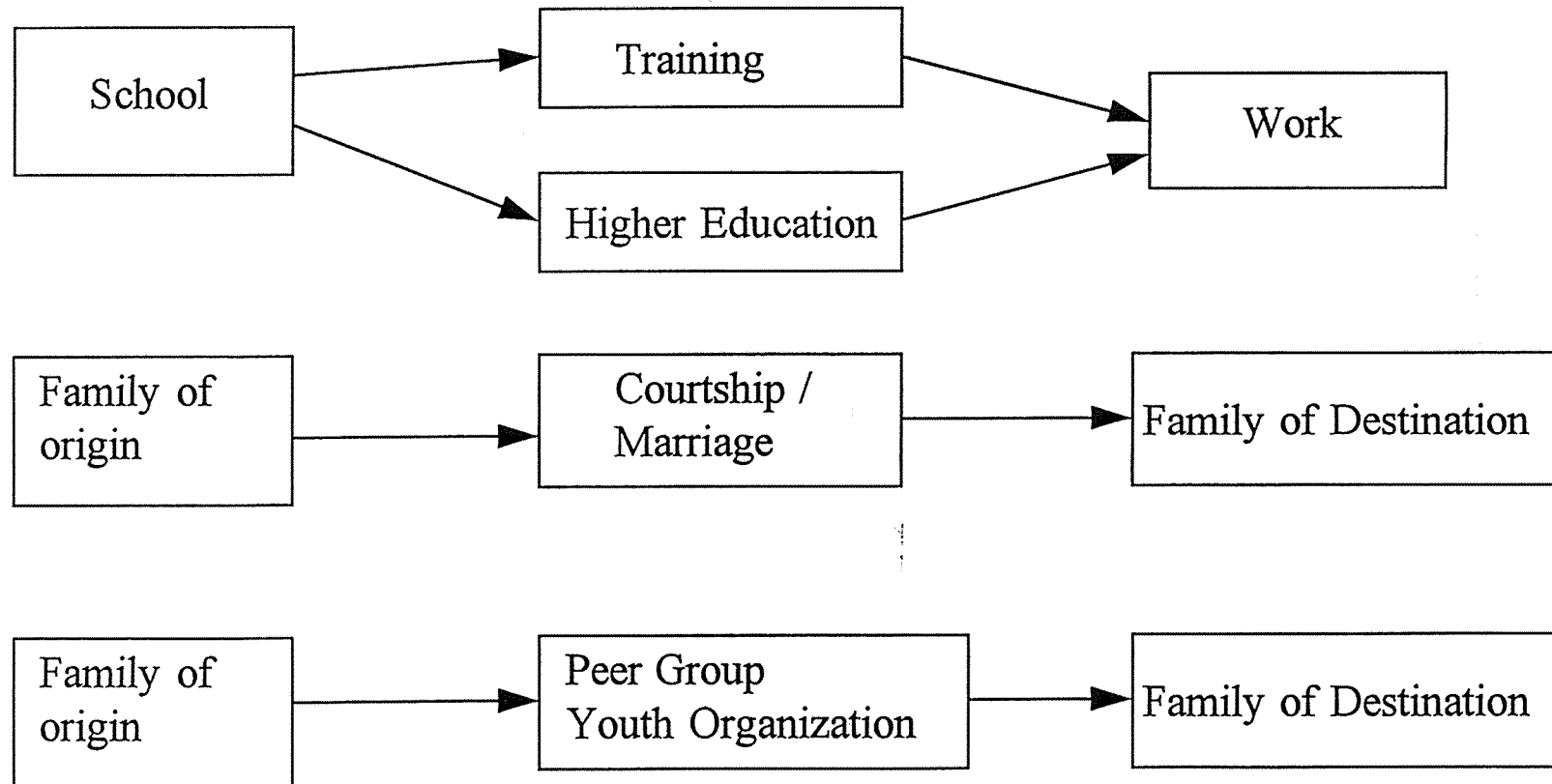


The consequences of modernity were that there was an attempt to divide the life-course into distinct stages and that these stages coincided or complemented one another. People moved from school into work. Later they moved from school to higher education or training and then into work. In Germany this phase of training was more institutionalized than in Britain, but training was strictly age-specific in the form of apprenticeships for which there was an upper age limit. At another level they moved from the family of origin through courtship and marriage into the family of destination. The period of courtship and marriage was also associated with leisure activities of a distinctive kind, including participation in peer groups or youth organizations. In Communist countries youth organizations were a strong obligation for all those between 14 and 28. This pattern can be illustrated diagrammatically (see figure 2). These levels of age-phase transition were related - marriage was difficult without an independent income and even by law, since men were not supposed to marry until they reached a certain level in their career in some occupations, whilst women were forced to retire from work by the 'marriage bar'.

These age-status transitions happened in different ways for different social classes: the lower down the social ladder the more accelerated they were. Working class young people entered work earlier and were therefore financially independent at an earlier stage and therefore able to embark upon other life transitions. The also took place in different ways for different genders. Young women went through the cycle more quickly than young men, since they married earlier and entered partnerships earlier young men. They were also less likely to pursue extended education or training than were young males (Wallace 1987).

These tendencies of modernization were associated with the progressive rationalization of bureaucracies and the classification and surveillance of citizens. Age was a way of carrying out this monitoring and classification and numerical age, or the calibration of the life-span became important. As a result people were supposed to pass through fairly structured age-status transitions. Identity was supposed to be fixed according to age, status, time and place. What is also interesting is that with youth identified in these ways, psychologists, sociologists, criminologists and medical specialists were able to contribute texts which analyzed these age-status transitions as though they were necessary and inevitable. Indeed such literature helped to fix a normative model of youth and what should be seen as 'immature' 'premature' 'precocious' 'too late' or 'too early'. The influential work of Erikson, Burt and Coleman would be examples of this. However, the fact that these age-status transitions were rather weakly based and uncertain is reflected in the way in which they were normatively defined. Modernisation destroyed traditional age-status transitions but replaced them with rationally based ones which were only shallowly rooted and could be challenged by changing social mores.

Structured Age-Status Transitions (1)



The tendencies I have described are particularly obvious in Western, industrial capitalist countries, including Western Europe, especially its northern parts. However, modernization was not uniform and has taken a number of different forms. In Southern Europe there is delayed modernization since the disruptive impact of industrialization and all that I have described was mediated by more traditional family and community structures. Industrialization occurred only later in these predominantly rural communities such as Greece, Southern Italy, Spain and Portugal and was further delayed by strongly conservative political regimes. In these regions, age-status transitions are structured more by traditional models of family transmission and ritual. In other places there are reactive, anti-modernizing tendencies which I shall discuss later.

Communist European societies underwent forced modernization imposed from above or by an occupying power and this left many traditional values about familial, tribal and ethnic association intact (Gellner 1994). In most cases this forced modernization occurred at a very rapid pace following the second world war and the imposition of strong state control. The development of universal education was one of the main achievements of this process. As a result age-status transitions were institutionalized very strongly and very quickly. In general the education-to-work cycle took place more rapidly than in many capitalist societies since training was integrated into education. Gender differences were institutionalized in different ways since all women were obliged to work, but in a sex-segregated labour market and with different social benefits. The transition to marriage also took place more quickly following the transition to work and various inducements such as marriage grants to young couples. However, the housing crisis meant that young people lived with parents for longer periods of time - even after they had their own families - often in very overcrowded conditions. This, along with childcare arrangements, lead to very close-knit inter-generational relations (Mozny 1994). Youth was very clearly defined by membership of the official youth organizations which were a further method of the control and surveillance of young people. However, there were also youth sub-cultures and 'non formal' groups, albeit existing in a clandestine way since they were not approved by the Communist authorities.

In other words, age-status transitions were rather strongly defined under Communism, in formal terms by the official youth organizations and the very structured transitions between education and work and in informal terms by the non-formal groups and by the strong inter-generational ties.

Modernity therefore broke apart traditional inter-generational relations to replace them with ones where youth was relatively independent category, but one associated with problems and anxieties. It was a rather fragile and uncertain period of life. Nevertheless the normative models of what was supposed to happen at which stage were rather often described and analyzed. For a time there even was some coincidence between the various life-transitions. However, this was soon to change.

Post/Late Modernization Trends

Although there are many debates about post-modernism, often carried out at an abstruse level of abstraction and often critical of sociology as a project, I would like to here define this as some trends or tendencies in post-war industrial societies. Some have identified our current world as one of 'late modernism' (Giddens 1991, Beck 1986) others as 'post modern' (Lash 1990, Bauman 1992). Rather than engaging with debates about which is the most appropriate characterization, I will identify some empirical trends which are relevant to age-phase transitions and to youth in particular. My argument is that the age-status transitions which I identified in the first half of this article are becoming increasingly de-structured as a result of these tendencies.

The first factor is the disappearance of the youth labour market. There is little work for young people to enter. Unemployment particularly affected young people everywhere, and in Spain, Italy, Ireland and France youth unemployment stands between 23% and 38%. In other countries this problem is disguised by the successful expansion of training and education or by 'intervention' schemes of various kinds. In Britain, for example, the training schemes introduced as a response to rising youth unemployment now take about one quarter of the age-cohort.

Furthermore, the kind of work which is available is changing. De-industrialization and the flexibilisation of production, the movement towards service industries, mean that increasingly employment is short-term, based upon contracts or part-time. These kinds of employment have been increasing whereas the more traditional kinds of strongly protected full-time permanent employment has been decreasing (Lash and Urry 1987). Jobs for life are a thing of the past and a young person cannot expect long-term security from employment. In addition, young people increasingly form part of a large casualised labour market - Macdonaldised jobs (Ritzer 1993, Esping-Anderson 1990) as they strive to supplement their training allowances, stipends or pay their way through college.

The second factor is the extension of education and training means that students and trainees become older and older. This has happened over the post-war period but has even accelerated in recent years. Thus in 1987 38% of Europe's youth stayed beyond the last year of compulsory schooling but by 1991 it was 42% (Halsey et al. 1988, Chisholm and Bergeret 1991, Bundesministerium für Bildung und Wissenschaft 1992/3). More and more people entered Higher Education - in Western Europe the numbers increased threefold between 1950 and 1980 (OECD Monitor 1981). In England the percentage of the age-cohort in Higher Education increased from 1 in 20 in 1950 to 1 in 5 now and in Germany there was a fourfold increase between 1975 and 1980. Not only are people entering HE in higher numbers but they are staying in it for longer. In Germany the average age for finishing a degree is now 28 and rising all the time. In Britain where the age was much lower, more and more are taking post-graduate degrees in addition to their normal degrees. This means that older and older people are in Higher Education - indeed older groups are encouraged to enter as 'mature students'.

At other levels of the education system there has been a proliferation of new forms of education with the extension of further and vocational education of all types. The numbers in vocational education across Europe vary between 90% and 25% but in all countries have been increasing (UNESCO Statistical Yearbook 1992). New routes through education and training have opened with the result that students and trainees become older and older. Training schemes have expanded, both in response to demand but also as a way of 'mopping up' unemployment in most countries. Where they did not previously exist, they were introduced. Training became an end in itself rather than a means to an end as the outcomes of training, in the form of jobs, became less and less certain. Therefore a person could have a training and educational career, moving from one form of scheme or course to another without ever entering employment. It became more common for people to undertake one or even more training schemes before entering education and this could be interspersed with periods of casual work or travel. The age of entering work is postponed. In some northern European countries such as Denmark, people commonly do not even enter Higher Education until in their thirties.

Young people have changed from being beginning workers to being 'trainees' or 'students'. To put it at its most stark: in 1945 80% of 14 year olds in Europe went straight into work; in 1990 80% of 14-18 year olds were still in education (Chisholm and Bergeret 1991).

A third factor is the growth of consumer culture. This has helped to develop individualized leisure styles and tastes, more choices and new social groups and identities. This trend is discernible in Eastern Europe too (Kalman 1995). As employment becomes increasingly less relevant for defining young people's social identities (either because it is ever more remote at the end of a long period of education or because jobs have disappeared), so consumer or leisure identities become more important. Hence a young person's position as a follower of heavy metal music could be more important than the indeterminate nature of their work. Hedonistic life-styles associated with leisure and consumption which were thought in the past to characterize working class youth now characterize youth of all social classes and indeed people of all social ages, not just youth (Roberts et al. 1990) As a result there are more choices and faster cycles of activity.

A fifth factor is the tendency towards globalization and the creation of supra-national organizations tends to export western industrial models of youth all over the world. The United Nations 'Year of Youth' is one example of this, but the information or communications revolution also plays a part. MTV, levi jeans, walkmen and other youth styles are transposed to other parts of the world leading to the transformation of societies there. Therefore a particular model of 'youth' and youth problems are being discovered all over the world. Often these are spread through non-verbal forms of communication such as music or images which have a very direct appeal. The commercialization of youth culture evident since the second world war has a strong influence in this. Therefore this is associated with new styles of communication which can transmit youth cultures and styles very quickly and very effectively.

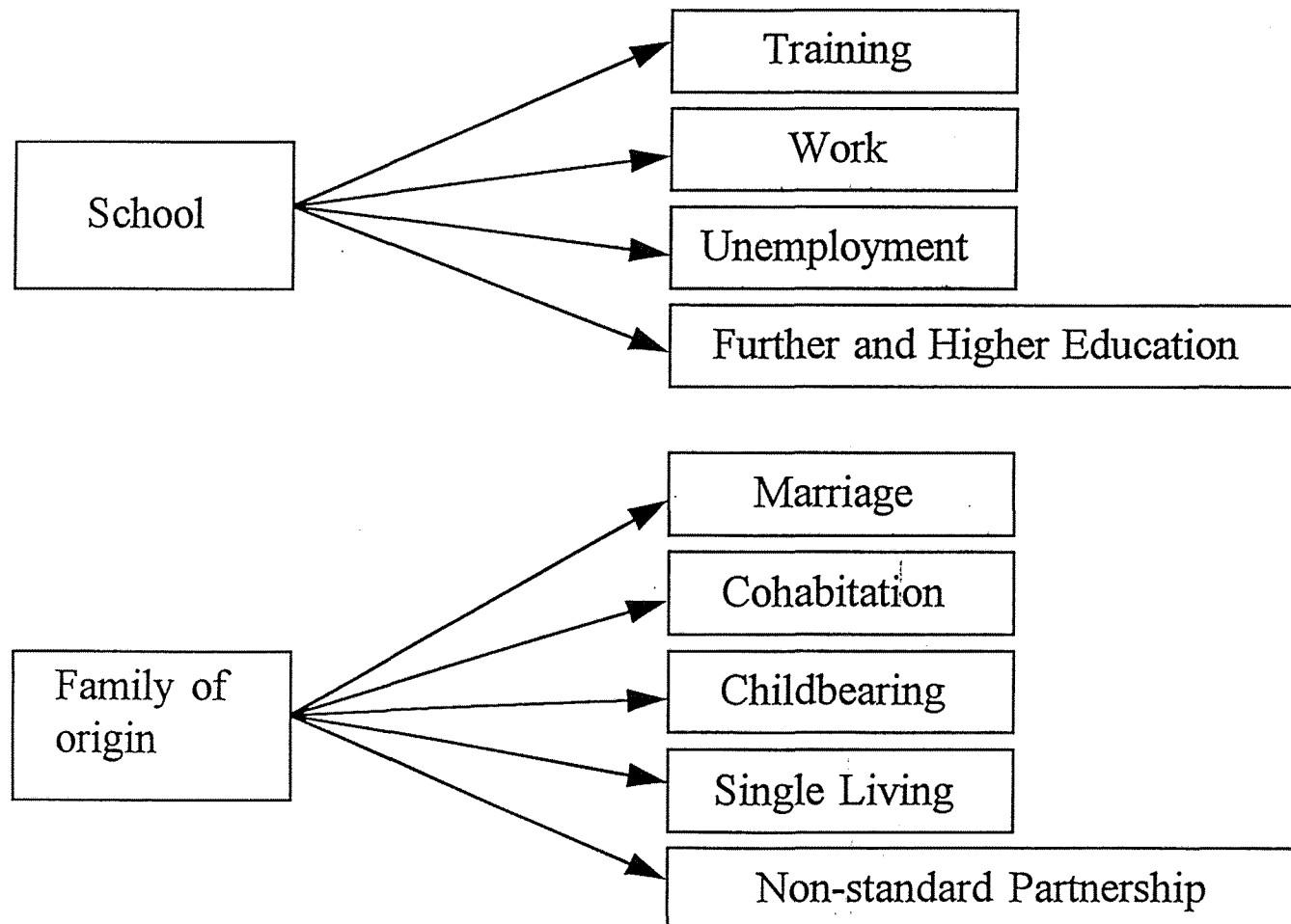
Furthermore as well as youth styles being transmitted further afield, youth themselves are transmitted further afield. Like the early modern "Wanderjahr", age-status transitions are associated with traveling around the country or around the world, often with no fixed purpose or end goal apart from travel itself. Educational programmes give positive encouragement just as depressed opportunity on the labour market give more negative encouragement. Young people especially from the US, from Canada and from Australia can be found wandering around the world as "poverty jet setters". The experimentation with life-styles and identities takes place on a larger and larger territory.

A further series of trends is for family transitions to become likewise destructured. As work recedes into the future in importance, so other life transitions are no longer linked to finding work. Nor are they linked to one another. The growth in cohabitation instead of or preceding marriage is one example. Marriage itself is not less popular, but more popular as divorce and multiple marriages become more common. Just as living together is de-coupled from marriage, so is childbearing. The rate of extra-marital births increased from one in twenty thirty years ago to one in three today in Britain and has been increasing in most European countries, especially the Scandinavian countries and France (Social Trends 1995). This trend was also discernible in some of the communist countries (Wallace and Kovacheva 1995). More and more people are living alone, outside of any relationship or in non-standard gay or lesbian partnerships. There is therefore a greater variety of choices of life-style and these can take place in any particular order. They are no longer linked to age-status transitions or even to each other.

This de-structuring of age-status transitions can be illustrated in diagrammatically in figure 3. Here people move from full time education into training, work, part-time work, further study, Higher Education and so on. They can move between these different institutions in almost any order and they may move backwards and forwards between them.

Similarly in terms of their other life course transitions, they can move between marriage, cohabitation, childbearing, single living, living with parents or non-standard partnerships in almost any order. Furthermore, they are likely to move around between these status' rather than from one to another (Jones 1987). Movement is not in one direction only.

De-structured Age-Status Transitions (2)



However, such trends are more obvious in North-Western Europe than in Southern Europe where it is still a stigma to have a child outside marriage and where leaving the parental home for any reason apart from marriage is unthinkable. Nevertheless, very high unemployment and lengthening periods in education have led to the postponing of many age-status transitions both into the work and into the family (Chisholm and Bergeret 1991).

De-structured Transitions

The result is that age-status transitions have been de-structured (Olk 1988). Transitions are no longer associated with any particular age, or with each other. Youth has become more and more protracted with a long period of 'post adolescence' (Klein 1990) at the upper end which is indeterminate. The outcomes of transitional phases are uncertain or risky - education is de-coupled from work, training is de-coupled from work, childbearing is de-coupled from marriage, marriage is de-coupled from work, leaving home is de-coupled from marriage and so on. People's options and identities are no longer fixed or certain and their futures can take a number of directions, the end point of which is not always clear (Evans and Heinz 1994). Age-status transitions are open ended - they can go on for a long or a short period of time.

One result of this is that youth has become generalized - everyone wants to be young and can behave as though they were young. There is a cult of youth which is no longer restricted to young people. Preserving and improving one's body to look younger for longer takes place through constant exercise, diet and vigilance or through surgical intervention. The youthful body is important for everyone. But the youthful body no longer belongs only to youth. Since courtship is no longer associated with a 'brief flowering' of youth, people can project themselves as sexually attractive at all ages. Women past 35 no longer see themselves as 'on the shelf' and consigned to a formal dress, but as part of the youthful world. Pop idols such as Tina Turner, Cher, Cliff Richard or Elton John cultivate more youthful images now than when they first began their media careers some decades ago. Hairstyles and fashions no longer focus on teenagers but are generalized to all age groups. Since the teenage market has disappeared and the earlier post-war generation socialized into consumer behavior has grown older, so fashions and styles are aimed at all age groups. Men as well as women are encouraged to participate in these narcissistic pleasures of fashion and bodily cultivation (Featherstone and Hepworth 1991).

Whilst youthfulness has been generalized to all age-groups, at the other end of the age-spectrum, childhood is disappearing. Neil Postman (1983) has argued that childhood disappeared with the advent of television and electronic media. In the times of exclusive reliance on the printed word, young people needed to be socialized for many years before they could read sufficiently well to have access to the adult world of books. Now they have access instantaneously through visual mass media and there are no longer any more adult 'secrets'. Whilst I am skeptical of this kind of 'single cause' explanation, it is undoubtedly the case that children have grown older. Commercial organizations have fostered this by encouraging adult patterns of consumer behavior at earlier

ages, access to credit cards, finance and bank accounts at younger ages and the general introduction of younger and younger people into the commercial consumer world (Jones and Wallace 1992). Similarly, the age of the menarche has fallen by about five years over the last 150 years and the age of sexual initiation is falling all the time (Coleman and Hendry 1980, Molnar 1993). The individualization of consumption and extension of rights to young people and children within the family helps to construct them as separate, autonomous, decision-making individuals (Chisholm et al. 1995). Consequently they are now the ones who socialize parents in consumer behavior rather than the other way round. Certain forms of political consciousness - especially that to do with animal rights and the environment - are also likely to be transmitted from children to adults rather than vice versa. The lines of authority within the family are reversed and parents are less and less able to control or direct their children once they begin on the long journey through 'youth'.

In Communist societies, the rigid and ossified order which was imposed by forced modernization disintegrated very quickly with the collapse of the old order. In Albanian society, for example there was a very rapid change in youth mores with dating replacing the 'virgin marriage' and consumer culture replacing compulsory attendance in official youth organizations (Rexha 1994). The collapse of the old system meant a very rapid plunge into some of the trends I have described, although this is highly variable between different societies. As consumer culture became very quickly ubiquitous and unemployment or employment uncertainty was rapidly introduced, so young people were very quickly thrown from a world where everything was structured very rigidly to one where it was not structured at all. Whereas in the past education was tied very tightly to the allocation of jobs, there is now no certainty as to the outcome of education or even as to the form which education should take. Re-training has become urgent and necessary as old skills became rapidly obsolete and old industries closed, rationalized or are under sentence of death. From a world where one's whole life was structured and predictable, very little is now predictable. The lines of authority between parents and children were often reversed in a situation where children working in the new service industries could earn much more than their parents and the strong traditions of inter-generational transmission are threatened. The individualization of consumer styles, work styles and identities and the new possibilities for mobility mean that the strong, cohesive family structures which developed under communism are potentially under threat although they also a means by which family members are protected from risk and uncertainty in a melting world (Wallace 1995). New transitions in family life appear to be developing, although at a slower pace than is the case in Western Europe. All these trends are far more obvious in the more western countries of the former communist block where communication with developed capitalist societies creates additional pressures for change. In some countries this dissolution has led to extreme chaos, anarchy and even war.

The old youth organizations which used to structure age-status transitions have disappeared in many countries to be replaced with a rapidly changing kaleidoscope of parties and organizations which disappear by the time they are announced (Kovacheva and Wallace 1994). Commercial

youth culture and individualized consumption has replaced these collectivized forms of 'social' youth. But along with the disappearance of the youth organizations (not much mourned by most people) there has disappeared certainty and structures which sheltered young people. The privileged access to sports and other facilities has also gone as everyone must fend for themselves.

However, this forced, rapid modernization followed by de-modernization, equally rapid, is also accompanied by anti-modern reactions. The growth of nationalist, ethnic or religious movements representing a new vision of community reconstructed upon more traditional principles of ethnicity, patriarchy and a strong authoritarian state could be said to be a reaction against these disintegrating post-modern tendencies as much as against the consequences of modernization. Such movements give a strong sense of structure and identity in the face of disintegration and fractured identity. Rather than embracing the advent of ambiguous and multiple identities, they seek to enforce one homogenous one. These movements are also a reaction against globalization and westernization by asserting a strong sense of a traditional, localized and distinctive community. They represent the victory of the conservative rural community over the cosmopolitan and multi-ethnic city (Milicevic 1995). Such anti-modern movements encourage conservative family systems with structured generational and age-relations.

Thus far, I have described some processes in the de-structuring of the youth phase. Now I shall turn to some of its implications.

Implications of the De-structuring of Age-Status Transitions

The trends described here have a number of implications for industrial societies more generally. First it is evident that someone must financially support these very protracted and elastic transitions. Financing can take three forms. Either the state pays in the form of training allowances, educational grants and so on. However, states in most western industrial countries are compelled to reduce their budgets rather than to expand them as the number of claimants grows. In post-communist Europe this is even more the case. Another alternative is that the family supports young people for longer periods and this puts additional strains on families where young people simply do not leave home or become in any way independent. Parents have to support them for longer and longer periods of time, although their own authority is diminished. Nor is it always clear who is the responsible parent when divorce and re-marriage may have fragmented family relationships. Indeed in some cases, it is the parents who leave home or in other ways restructure their lives to encourage their offspring to leave (Ainly 1991). A last alternative is that young people support themselves through part-time and casualised employment. In Eastern Europe, where support for children from parents was an established tradition, individualization as a consequence of late-modernization creates new strains and tensions.

Linked to this, it seems that extended transitions can contribute to the deepening crisis of the welfare state in industrial societies. In most countries welfare benefits are linked to employment and employment-related schemes, but where people do not enter employment until relatively late in life or maybe never have any regular employment this potentially undermines the welfare system which is sustained by a shrinking employment base. Indeed, increasingly age is obsolete as a means of structuring welfare and social goods - the age at which training or apprenticeship should be done, the age at which young people are deemed to be independent of parents and so on are all normatively described. However, it would seem that it is stage not age which is important.

In order to cater for this pattern of moving in and out of different status', educational systems will have to become increasingly flexible and less linked to age. Education and training should be something which people may have to do throughout their lives as skills become rapidly obsolete and they may have to change careers. It is not longer linked to age-status transitions. Flexible education and training should include 'open learning' tendencies which can be built around employment, family or other commitments and carried out at home or through electronic media.

A number of authors have discussed the implications of such changes for identity. The late-modern trends are associated with 'individualization' (Beck 1986). This describes the tendency towards increasingly flexible self-awareness as the individual must make decisions and choose identities from among an increasingly complex range of options. This is also accompanied by increased risk and uncertainty as the courses through life are fluid and changing.

Finally it is evident that identities as workers, as family members and as tax-paying citizens will become more fluid and uncertain. Citizenship and welfare entitlement should be linked to individualized needs rather than to age or to work status if it is to be equitable and fair (in fact the tendency is in the opposite direction - to exclude claimants on the basis of age and to link benefits more securely to employment). We will no longer be able to make any assumptions that because a person is a certain age, that anything else about them will necessarily follow.

I have concentrated mainly on youth in this discussion, but many of these tendencies can also be seen at the other end of the age spectrum - that of old age. Just as youth age-status transitions are being destructured, so are those of the 'elderly' and 'old age' (Hockey and James 1993). The age of retirement which at one time defined the active and the inactive population is longer so definitive and is actively contested. Improved health and nutrition along with a cultural re-evaluation of age mean that old age is no longer the passive retreat from society that it once represented and which is embodied in the word 'retirement' (Giarchi 1995).

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Institut für Höhere Studien
Institute for Advanced Studies

Stumpergasse 56

A-1060 Vienna

Austria

Phone: +43-1-599 91-216

Fax: +43-1-599 91-191